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Doing discourse analysis in critical geopolitics

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Abstract: This paper seeks to contribute towards a more explicit and candid discussion of the methodologies of discourse analysis within critical geopolitics. Proposing a classification along the three core dimensions of context (proximate or distal), analytic form (post-/structuralist or interpretive-explanatory) and political stance (involved or detached), it examines the ways in which critical geopolitics scholarship has understood and made use of discourse analysis. Subsequently, the paper introduces the poststructuralist discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe, arguing that it is particularly suitable to address a number of key emerging concerns on the agenda of critical geopolitics

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Les théories de la Géopolitique

Les contributions anciennes et nouvelles à une approche théorique en géopolitique

Doing discourse analysis in Critical Geopolitics

Analyse du discours en géopolitique critique (Critical Geopolitics)

MARTIN MÜLLER

Résumés

Analyse du discours en géopolitique critique (Critical Geopolitics)

L'objectif de cet article est d'offrir un exposé plus explicite de la méthodologie utilisée pour l'analyse du discours en géopolitique critique (Critical Geopolitics). En proposant une classification selon trois dimensions principales, soient le contexte (immédiat ou distal), la forme analytique (poststructuraliste ou impérative-explicative) et la position politique (impliquée ou détachée), il examine de quelles façons la géopolitique critique comprend et utilise l'analyse du discours. Puis, il propose que la théorie poststructuraliste du discours d'après Laclau et Mouffe soit particulièrement appropriée pour tenter de résoudre une variété de problèmes émergents en géopolitique critique.

This paper seeks to contribute towards a more explicit and candid discussion of the methodologies of discourse analysis within critical geopolitics. Proposing a classification along the three core dimensions of context (proximate or distal), analytic form (post-/structuralist or interpretive-explanatory) and political stance (involved or detached), it examines the ways in which critical geopolitics scholarship has understood and made use of discourse analysis. Subsequently, the paper introduces the poststructuralist discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe, arguing that it is particularly suitable to address a number of key emerging concerns on the agenda of critical geopolitics.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : identité, méthodologie, analyse du discours, poststructuralisme, géopolitique critique

Keywords : methodology, discourse analysis, poststructuralism, identities, critical

Texte intégral**Introduction**

- 1 Along with the concept of discourse, discourse analysis has gained popularity as a methodology in the constructivist social sciences. The field of international relations, for example, has seen a rapid proliferation of discourse analytic approaches for the critical study of world politics (see Checkel, 2004; Milliken, 1999 for overviews and critiques). The same rings true with critical geopolitics scholarship. In the analysis of the social construction of world politics – the mainstay of critical geopolitics – authors in critical geopolitics have taken recourse to discourse analysis as a tool for coming to terms with such diverse issues as the rhetorical production of marginality, resistance and otherness through geopolitical discourses (e.g. Kuus, 2004) or the constitutive and disciplining power of geopolitical discourses as truth regimes (e.g. Gilbert, 2005; Ó Tuathail, 1996). Similarly, discourse and discourse analysis have been among the most popular concepts to study the formation of geopolitical identities (e.g. Newman, 2000).
- 2 The adoption of the discourse concept in critical geopolitics has brought attention to the contexts of the geopolitical construction of meaning. Proponents of critical geopolitics have argued that a discursive analysis of geopolitics must take into account the particular political and social contexts in which geopolitical power is embedded (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992). These tallies with Angermüller's (2001) definition of discourse analysis as focusing on

the link between text and its context. For discourse analysis, texts are not containers of self-referential meaning, but the recorded traces of discourse activity which can never be completely reduced to text (Angermüller, 2001, p. 8)
- 3 Yet, frequent claims to 'do a discourse analysis' in critical geopolitics are accompanied by a rather vague specification of the methodology that underpins this analysis. Indeed, this problem is not limited to critical geopolitics but affects discourse research across disciplines. The founding editorial of the journal *Discourse and Society* underlines the need for 'explicit and systematic analyses based on 'serious methods and theories' (van Dijk, 1990, p. 14). More than 10 years on, Antaki et al. (2003) note that this call is as topical today as it was then, as a large number of studies still fail to rigorously engage in analysis of discourse and lack an explication of their methodology. Writing from the perspective of international relations, Checkel (2004, p. 239) claims that constructivist scholars still often avoid to explicitly 'describe and justify the sources and techniques they use to reconstruct discourses'.
- 4 Within critical geopolitics, explicit attempts at a discourse analysis which lays out its methodological assumptions and is candid about the process of constructing a methodology are still comparatively rare (but see Glasze, 2007b; Ó Tuathail, 2002). This reticence about methodology is all the more surprising since there is no shared understanding or established methodology of 'doing a

discourse analysis' as in the case of content analysis, for example. In contrast to the established routines of traditional methods of text analysis, approaches to discourse analysis are far from drawing on a commonly accepted methodological canon. Ó Tuathail (2002, p. 606) has therefore aptly remarked that 'discussion of how to formally undertake a discourse analysis of geopolitical reasoning and foreign policy practice is long overdue'.

- 5 So far, Ó Tuathail's call for theoretical engagement with discourse analysis has remained largely unanswered. While attempts at finding a common definition of the concept of discourse occurred relatively early in the development of critical geopolitics (Dalby, 1991; Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992), the reception of the discourse analysis literature remains still cursory. Various approaches to discourse analysis have been touched on, ranging from Critical Discourse Analysis as developed by Meyer and Wodak (in Dahlman and Brunn, 2003) to a form of meso-level discourse analysis which draws on Foucault but shows parallels to narrative analysis in its attention to narrative techniques and storylines (Ó Tuathail, 2002). Yet, the majority of studies which employ discourse analysis proceed without explicit reference to this methodological literature. This absence of substantial discussion methodologies of discourse analysis may have provoked part of the critique which chastises discourse studies at large for their policy irrelevance (Martin, 2001) and privileging of playful and lofty theorising at the expense of 'serious' engagement with social relations and social practices (Hamnett, 1997).

- 6 To be sure, the analysis of discourse draws part of its power from the very fact that there is not one established 'how-to-do-a-discourse-analysis scheme'. Different forms of discourse analysis need to be tailored both to the goals of the study and to the respective concept of discourse in order to fully harness their analytical power. Discourse analysts caution that a universal recipe for the utilisation of discourse analysis

does not exist and should not be developed. For, whereas there is a great need to develop our critical reflections on how to apply discourse theory in concrete studies, we should not aim to solve the methodological question once and for all. Discourse theorists must remain methodological bricoleurs and refrain from developing an all-purpose technique for discourse analysis (Torfing, 1999, p. 292).

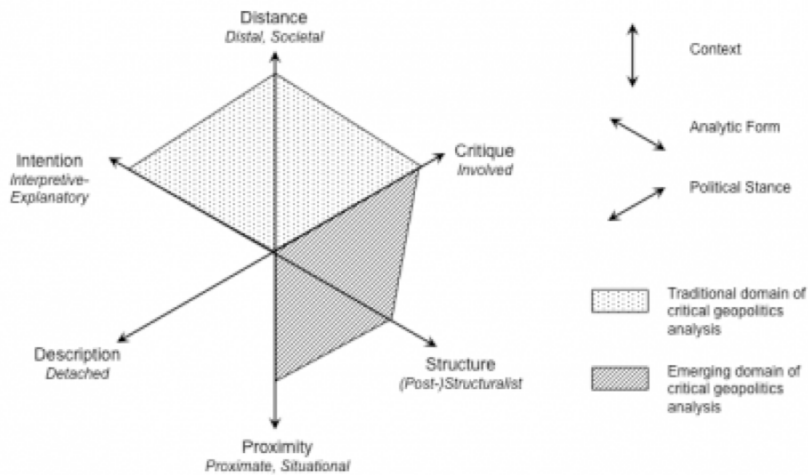
Method is not synonymous with a free-standing and neutral set of rules and techniques that can be applied mechanically to all empirical objects. Instead, while discourse theorists ought to reflect upon and theorize the ways they conduct research, these questions are always understood within a wider set of ontological and epistemological postulates, and in relation to particular problems (Howarth, 2004, p. 317).

- 7 My aim in this paper is therefore not to develop a novel method or methodology for discourse analysis – of which there are plenty indeed. My call is rather for more transparency in using discourse analysis as a methodology. To get closer to this aim this paper provides a systematisation and survey of the key dimensions of discourse analysis and how they have traditionally played out in critical geopolitics scholarship. Subsequently, it will introduce the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe and give an outline of its advantages for framing the analysis of geopolitical discourses in critical geopolitics.

Systematising approaches to discourse analysis

- 8 Discourse analysis is sometimes (mis-)taken to be a method of data analysis, just like content analysis or factor analysis. Yet, more than only a method, above all discourse analysis is a methodology (Angermüller, 2001; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002; Phillips and Hardy, 2002). It thus does not only comprise methods of data collection and analysis but integrates them with a set of assumptions concerning the constructive effect of language and social practice (Milliken, 1999; Wood and Kroger, 2000). Choosing a discourse analytic approach involves a complex balancing act between the aims and scope of such an analysis, the topic of the research and the type of data one wants to collect (cf. Wetherell, 2001, p. 380). This paper suggests a systematisation of approaches to the analysis of discourse in critical geopolitics along three core dimensions: the *context* of analysis (proximate and distal), the *analytic form* of analysis (post-/structuralist and interpretive-explanatory) and the *political stance* of analysis (involved and detached).
- 9 While there are numerous other possibilities of classification (e.g. Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000), these three dimensions reflect key concerns that have emerged in discussions of the discourse concept in critical geopolitics scholarship and crop up, implicitly or explicitly, in almost every empirical study. The question of context has been raised by Ó Tuathail (2002) in his discussion of micro, meso and macro approaches to discourse analysis. The question of analytic form has been at the centre of attention in Müller (2008). The political stance of analysis, finally, has been the hallmark and defining principle of critical geopolitics research ever since its beginnings (e.g. Dalby, 1991; Dodds and Sidaway, 1994; Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992). The following sub-sections will introduce the three dimensions and locate critical geopolitical research within them, as shown in stylised form in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Three core dimensions of approaches to discourse analysis in critical geopolitics



The context of analysis

- 10 The construction of world politics is invariably married to particular contexts, as meanings shift between social and political settings (Wetherell, 2001, p. 389). Anything that is not explicitly expressed in the data corpus but manifests its traces and is considered necessary as an interpretive frame for understanding the meaning fixations that occur in discourses must therefore be treated as relevant context. It is the discourse analyst's task to establish the context for the reader to participate in the discursive meaning construction. The discourse analyst usually has to deal

with multiple and overlapping contexts, as well as the infinite task of contextualizing the problem under consideration; as Derrida suggests there are no fully saturated contexts, as the traces of signifiers are always detectable in innumerable other contexts (Howarth, 2004, p. 337).

- 11 We are usually quite confident in identifying the kinds of texts which are pertinent to the research question we want to examine. But where do we draw the line between what counts as context and what does not? The decision how much and what kind of context to include is one of the most characteristic distinguishing features between different discourse analytic approaches and the aims of the analysis and the type of data determine to a large degree the selection of the context (Wetherell, 2001). I follow the terminology introduced by Schegloff (1992, p. 195), which, although he developed it specifically for the use in conversation analysis, can be purposefully extended to the field of critical geopolitics. We can speak of *proximate context* as the features immediately relevant to a piece of text or an interaction, e.g. the capacities in which people speak or the particular setting and genre of the interaction (for example student-teacher interaction in the classroom). More general aspects of social life such as class, gender, ethnicity or culture on the other hand are grouped together as *distal context*.
- 12 For the inclusion of the proximate context into discourse analysis,

ethnographic research can be a central component of discursive research for its capacity to record how discourses are reflected, enacted, recited and reworked through particular situated practices (Agar, 2005; Cicourel, 1992; Neumann, 2002). Fairclough (1995, p. 9f.) underscores that in discourse analysis there is a need to bring together close textual analysis with ethnographic analysis of social structures and settings. Depending on the kind of discourse analytic approach and the underpinning discourse concept, ethnography may go beyond this and form a part of discourse analysis in the analysis of everyday social practices, e.g. ways of dressing or eating, and how these are expressions or contestations of discourse. Context can therefore be more than merely a setting or a situational framework; it is something that asks for a comprehensive theoretical treatment (Weiss and Wodak, 2003, p. 21).

- 13 Almost without exception, research into geopolitical identities has been concerned primarily with distal context and large data corpora. The centrality of geopolitical culture in the study of geopolitical identity formation underlines the conceptualisation of identities as embedded in social structures at large. Geopolitical culture is understood as

formed not only by the institutions of a state, its historical experiences and geographical embeddedness, but also by networks of power within society, debates over national identity, prevailing geopolitical imaginations, codified geopolitical traditions and the institutional processes by which foreign policy is made in the state (O'Loughlin, Ó Tuathail, and Kolossov, 2005, p. 324).

- 14 In several major works, such as the ones by Agnew (1998), Agnew and Corbridge (1995) or Dijkink (1996), the analysis of geopolitical visions and identities as manifested in texts is embedded in the changing political and social conditions of different times. Resembling the Foucauldian understanding of discourse as a comprehensive social meaning structure that permeates all aspects of society, studies of geopolitical identities often cut across disciplines and social fields to grasp the complexity of identities that are formulated in a multitude of different sites, in different situations and across scale levels.
- 15 While such studies are frequently characterised by sweeping historical or spatial reach, other research also operates with distal context but applies it within a more limited setting supplementing it with proximate context. Sharp (2000a) describes the institutional site of the production of discourses in the *Reader's Digest* and how they reflect popular conceptions of individual freedom, national exceptionalism or danger and threat. Still more in-depth, Megoran's (2004; 2005) ethnographic study of the Ferghana Valley border crisis is a case in point where textual representations of geopolitical developments and the proximate context of everyday social life in the Uzbek-Kyrgyz borderland come together to sublimate into geopolitical identities. While also providing a cross-section through many aspects of human society, ethnographic and case study approaches thus achieve a more concrete and dense formulation of context and are able to relate it more immediately to the analysis of texts but are faced with the challenge of linking proximate and distal context in the study of discourses.

The analytic form of analysis

- 16 Qualitative methods of text analysis have traditionally relied on an interpretive-explanatory form of analysis, which can purposefully be extended to the analysis of discourses. Interpretive-explanatory research tries 'to reconstruct the tacit rules, the shared experience and the collective knowledge of social actors' (Angermüller, 2005, p.4). Centring on the actor as the producer of meaning, an interpretive-explanatory form of analysis is in line with the general thrust of Ricoeur's agent-centred hermeneutics which captures both the intentionality of textual production and its social context. Interpretive-explanatory research acknowledges discourses as supersubjective structures which are both enabling and constraining human agency but in its analysis often tends to be concerned with the agency of individuals in meaning creation, 'telling the right kind of stories to the right audiences at the right moment' (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000, p. 1132).
- 17 The interpretive-explanatory form of analysis has been the mainstay in the critical interrogation of the formation of geopolitical identities. Bilgin's (2007) study of the instrumentality of geopolitical discourses in Turkey is an illustrative case in point for the interpretive-explanatory analytic form of discourse analysis. Declaring as its main goal the analysis of 'how and with what consequences civilian and military actors have used geopolitical discourse' (p. 741), Bilgin's preoccupation lies with how discourses are utilised strategically by actors from the military and political elite to accomplish certain political ends (p. 748). Largely sovereign actors are portrayed in their endeavours to construct their own discourses as a powerful tool to shape domestic political processes, all the while naturalising the ideological underpinnings of these discourses by presenting them as geopolitical truths (p. 753). Being careful to put texts into historical, political and social context in order to furnish an analysis that approximates the original meaning as closely as possible, Bilgin's paper encapsulates the key tenets of the interpretive-explanatory analytical form.
- 18 In a deliberate attempt at breaking with the interpretive-explanatory tradition, structuralist and post-structuralist analytic forms are less interested in the interpretation of the content of discourses or their intentionality than in the processes and mechanisms of the discursive coupling of text and context. Post-/structuralist analysis of discourses stresses the processes and mechanisms of the construction of meaning and its social effects, rather than meaning itself (Strüver, 2007, p. 688-690). This is achieved by looking at how articulations constantly reproduce, challenge and transform discourses (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 8-18; Mattissek and Reuber, 2004, p. 237-240). Discourse analysis in the archaeological tradition of Michel Foucault (1972 [1969]) is among the most explicit about this departure from the interpretation of meaning. It recognises that discourse must first and foremost be treated as a corpus of statements whose organisation is systematic and subject to certain regularities. Building on this basic assumption, poststructuralist discourse analysis identifies the rules which delimit the field of the speakable and examines how they come into effect in positioning subjects in their processes of identification – how discourse regulates the social world (Kendall and Wickham, 1999; Rose, 2007, p. 141ff.).
- 19 Such a stance has been much less popular in the analysis of geopolitical discourses. Häkli's (1998) piece on the production of political space in Finland is probably one of the most sophisticated contributions pursuing this line.

What is most notable in Häkli's study is the absence, by and large, of any implied intentionality in the creation of discourse and the conscious preoccupation with the logics of operation rather than with the meaning of discourse. He examines the rules that come into play in the production of truth effects in statements that delimit Finnish regions. With an eye on discursive transformation, he highlights how the creation of legitimate knowledge on regions as organic units shifts from historical tribal statements to functional economic statements and connects this process to the rising power of the modern state. The deployment of official spatial representations and their hegemonic way of mapping, compartmentalising and universalising space are charted as productive means of fixing space. In so doing, however, Häkli is mindful about the antagonistic potential contained within what he calls the lived social space, the dialects, customs, traditions or memories of the people in the thus constructed regions.

- 20 While the two extremes of analytic forms presented in this section may seem irreconcilable at first glance, Heracleous and Hendry contend that '[w]hen discourse is treated at a societal level', as is the case with the majority of geopolitical discourses, 'the tensions between structuralist and agent-centered perspectives can to a certain extent be bracketed out for the purpose of analysis' (Heracleous and Hendry, 2000, p. 1252). Extending Heracleous and Hendry's argument, I would argue that the two analytic forms are interlocked to such an extent that one can never be treated completely separate from the other: the analysis of discursive structures cannot circumvent the reconstruction of meaning and vice versa. Rather than being mutually exclusive, the decision between intentionality and structure boils down to a question of analytical focus. It is in the third dimension, the political stance of analysis, where interpretive-explanatory and post-/structuralist analytic forms in fact sometimes coalesce to render a critical analysis of discourses and their naturalising effects.

The political stance of analysis

- 21 The third distinguishing dimension, the political stance of discourse analysis, is a hotly debated issue in discourse studies (Billig, 1999a, 1999b). A critical, political take on discourse analysis centrally asks the questions of how phenomena variously termed dominance, hegemony, unequal power relationships or social inequality come about and how the constitution of the social world might be imagined alternatively (van Dijk, 1993). Such a critical approach to discourse analysis views the discourse analyst as an active force in society and politics. In adopting a critical perspective, discourse analysts are

primarily interested and motivated by pressing social issues, which [they hope] to better understand through discourse analysis. ... [C]ritical discourse analysts (should) take an explicit sociopolitical stance; they spell out their point of view, perspective, principles and aims. ... Their hope ... is change through critical understanding. ... Their critical targets are the power elites that enact, sustain, legitimate, condone or ignore social inequality and injustice. ... Their critique of discourse implies a political critique of those responsible for its perversion in the reproduction of dominance and inequality (van Dijk, 1993, p. 252-253).

- 22 The radical political thrust has been the central driver in the success of a critical stance towards geopolitical ideologies and truth claims. The critical analysis of how geopolitical discourses embody forms of power/knowledge (*pouvoir/savoir*) and are engaged in the ideological inscription of space lies at the heart of a critical geopolitics that challenges the common-sense understandings on which many discourses are built (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992). The discourse analyst sets out to unravel the implicit ideological assumptions of geopolitical discourses (Dodds, 2000, p. 31ff.) and to unearth the productive effects of geopolitical discourses as creating powerful ideologies (Dodds and Sidaway, 1994, p. 516; Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992, p. 198).
- 23 In its concern with the workings of power and ideology such a stance has much in common with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). While a critical take on discourse is not confined to CDA, CDA presents a comparatively unified body of literature. It maintains a division between discourse and other moments of the social, such as social relations, power practices, the economy or culture (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999, p. 28-29). From this division CDA develops its concept of discourse analysis as the analysis of the mediating links between the semiotic moment of language use, i.e. discourse, and the wider social and cultural structures (Titscher et al., 2000). CDA thus posits that there is a strong relation between linguistic and social structure and that ideologies are linguistically produced in attempts to form a collective political will and govern society. Not unlike the majority of critical geopolitics writing, CDA is rooted in theories in which actors are the key agents of social change. It therefore holds that groups or institutions can exert social power and control public discourse and thus influence the minds and actions of others (van Dijk, 2001). The challenge of CDA then is to link texts to ideologies and power relationships, to embed texts in the social conditions of their production (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; van Dijk, 2003, 2006).
- 24 At the other end, discourse analysts who stand in the tradition of conversation analysis contend that the political stance of critical discourse analysis represents an analytic bias and compromises the autonomy of the data by interpreting them from the viewpoint of the analyst's concerns. By compounding discourse analysis and politics researchers invalidate their source of authority, Schegloff argues (1997). A politically detached stance, by contrast, tends to abstain both from analysing data with a view on power relations and hegemony and from making judgements on the political implications of research findings. Frequently regarded as a technical discipline, the rules and regularities of the construction of texts, syntactic and semantic schemata of interaction are of greater interest to a descriptive discourse analyst than their imbrications with hegemonic fixations. The primary focus of this variant of discourse analysis is hence on the description of discursive characteristics in the situational use of language rather than on drawing connections to the larger societal level (Wetherell, 2001).

The analysis of geopolitical identity and the approach of Laclau and Mouffe

- 25 Discourse analysis in critical geopolitics has traditionally taken a critical stance and relied on actor theories to analyse discourses and their ideological effects in rather broad, distal contexts. This traditional domain is represented by the dotted area in Figure 1. In the past years, however, critical geopolitical research has begun to expand to areas and themes of research that are not easily captured by this description (see area marked 'emerging domains' in Figure 1). There seem to be two major developments. First, research has moved to include micro contexts and practices of the everyday as relevant sites for the discursive construction of identities. This picks up on a critique by Dodds (2001, p. 473) that 'critical geopolitics needs to perceive how nations as "imagined communities" are reproduced in the context of everyday life' and has led to studies that employ ethnography as a method to comprehend the lived geopolitical experiences of ordinary people (e.g. Hyndman, 2004; Megoran, 2005; Sundberg, 2008).
- 26 Second, the emerging trend in critical geopolitics to devote greater attention to practices and the situational context of discourses is bolstered up by theoretical interventions that have put forward a reconceptualisation of discourse and geopolitical identities along poststructuralist lines (Kuus, 2007; Müller, 2008). Centrally, this position holds that the a-priori, unified actor who 'carries' identity as an attribute has been privileged over a conceptualisation of subjects as being constituted within the discursive structures of texts and practices in the first place. With the move 'from doers to deeds' (Kuus, 2007, p. 97), translating such a stance into a discourse analysis demands replacing the preoccupation with actors as the central unit of analysis with an emphasis on the fixation, competition and change in discursive structures that takes place independently from particular actors.
- 27 The emerging shifts towards the inclusion of social practice in the proximate context and towards an emphasis on structure instead of intention in the analysis of geopolitical discourses and identities can only bear out, however, if they are methodologically framed within a kind of discourse analysis that reflects these propositions and incorporates them into an analytic framework. The discourse theory developed by Laclau and Mouffe has much to commend it for such a purpose, but despite its relevance for numerous aspects of critical geopolitics, it has so far received little attention in Anglo-American critical geopolitics. In order to facilitate future engagement with this approach to discourse analysis, this section will give a brief overview of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse, draw out its relevance for the conceptualisation and analysis of geopolitical identities and discuss examples of studies that develop methodologies from this approach.

Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse: discourse, identity, politics

- 28 Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse can be divided into three interdependent apparatuses: the *discourse apparatus*, the *identity apparatus* and the *politics apparatus*. Carrying an unmistakably poststructuralist mark, the *discourse apparatus* conceptualises the creation, transmutation and fixation of meaning through discourses within a hierarchical, relational and situationally contingent structure. The *identity apparatus* is primarily

concerned with the construction of meaning and subjects' identification with different subject positions. The *politics apparatus* finally accounts for the radical, post-Marxist edge of the discourse theory by introducing the concept of hegemony. Since Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory operates at a high level of abstraction and with a distinct conceptual vocabulary, Table 1 provides a glossary of the central terms.

Table 1: Glossary of terminology in Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory

18

Apparatus	Term	Concept
Discourse A relational ensemble of signifying practices creating meaning, which extends to the whole social space, both linguistic and extra-linguistic	Elements	Signifiers whose meanings are multiple and have not yet been fixed in a discourse
	Articulation	A practice through which a partial fixation of the meanings of elements is achieved
	Moments	Elements whose meaning has been partially fixated through articulation
	Closure	The fixation of the meaning of a signifier within a discourse
	Field of discursivity	The surplus of meaning which is outside discourse. A discourse is always constituted in relation to a field of discursivity. The field of discursivity harbours the potential for the contestation of a discourse.
	Nodal points	Privileged signifiers within discourses around which other moments are ordered in chains of equivalence
	Floating signifiers	Elements which are particularly open to different ascriptions of meaning and may form nodal points in different discourses
Identity Articulation of a subject position in a discourse which is always incomplete	Subject positions	Different possibilities of the construction of meaning of a subject in different discourses
	Contingency	A given identity is possible but not necessary. There can never be one single discourse which exclusively structures the social.
	Split subject	The split subject is perpetually incomplete and constantly strives to become a whole.
Politics The organisation of society in a particular way that excludes other possible arrangements	Antagonism	Discursive exteriority which presents a threatening force for a hegemonic discourse
	Hegemony	The fixation of meaning in an antagonistic terrain naturalising a particular articulation
	Objectivation	Discourses becoming seemingly natural and uncontested through hegemonic intervention
	Dislocation	A contingent event that cannot be symbolised or represented within a discourse and thus disrupts and destabilises orders of meaning

- 29 Laclau and Mouffe's *discourse apparatus* conceives of meaning as arising from a system of differences (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 106). The central unit of analysis in Laclau and Mouffe's discourse apparatus is the signifier or, more precisely, signifying practices. In the following, I will use the term 'signifier' as shorthand to refer to 'signifying practices'. There exist two different types of signifiers: 'moments' are signifiers whose meaning has been partially and temporarily fixated within relations of difference in a particular discourse,

whereas 'elements' are signifiers which have retained their polysemy and thus have multiple potential meanings. A discourse is forged and promulgated by establishing relations of equivalence and difference among elements by which their polysemy is reduced and they become moments: '[a]ny discourse is constituted as an attempt ... to arrest the flow of differences' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 112). This crucial process of transforming elements into moments is called articulation.

- 30 Laclau and Mouffe's concept of discourse denies, however, the possibility of the complete constitution of structure but argues instead that every closure is temporary and contingent, pre-supposing the unconditional openness of the social (Laclau and Mouffe, 1990 [1987]). Beyond linguistic channels of creating meaning, Laclau and Mouffe explicitly open their concept of discourse for the incorporation of social practices into the analysis of the constitution of meaning hegemonies:

a system of differences cannot consist of purely linguistic phenomena;
but must instead pierce the entire material density of the multifarious
institutions, rituals and practices (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 109).

- 31 The structuration of moments in a discourse takes place around nodal points, privileged signifiers around which moments are ordered in chains of equivalence. Before their articulation, nodal points were floating signifiers, elements which are not fixed to a particular signified and are therefore particularly open to differential ascriptions of meaning. Nodal points are thus privileged signifiers whose meaning within a discourse has already been established, whereas floating signifiers are potential nodal points whose meaning is still subject to struggle and contestation between different discourses (Torfing, 1999, p. 98-99; Žižek, 1989, p. 88ff.). Due to the virtual absence of a specific signified, floating signifiers can be inserted into a system of meaning differences and, turning into nodal points, derive their meaning from establishing equivalential relationships to other signifiers. As such they can serve to unify a discourse, binding together initially disparate moments and representing the totality of the social field (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 26ff.; Torfing, 1999, p. 98).

- 32 The ability of nodal points to unify a given social field by including moments in a chain of equivalence is crucial for the functioning of the *identity apparatus*. As the chain of equivalence comes to encompass ever more moments, anything that remains excluded poses a potential threat to that particular discourse, for it pools the social antagonisms that would subvert the system of differences fixed in the discourse. However, besides being the condition of the impossibility of a discourse, the excluded elements at the same time also represent the condition of possibility of a discourse, since by determining its limits they constitute its identity – they serve as a constitutive outside (Laclau, 1995; Torfing, 1999). This logic also extends to the identity of subjects. The identity of subjects is equal to the identification with subject positions, i.e. different possibilities of the meaning of a subject that are constructed within discourses against a constitutive outside (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 115). All identities are constituted by positing a difference that reinforces and challenges identity at the same time; the constitution of an 'us' is impossible without imagining a corresponding 'anti-us' or 'them' (Mouffe, 1995).

33 The unconditional openness and ultimate undecidability of the social world is the key postulate from which Laclau and Mouffe's theory derives its critical, post-Marxist impetus. The essential function of *hegemony* consists of reducing the undecidable level of total openness to a decidable level of discourse (Torfing, 1999, p. 102), to bring about the articulation of one meaning of an element and exclude other meanings. Floating signifiers, as I have established above, are at the heart of struggles for the inscription of meaning and the naturalisation of discourses. Floating signifiers epitomise contingency insofar as they possess a multitude of possible meanings of which none is necessary. For this very reason they are the subject of antagonistic struggles to articulate them and fill them with meaning which ultimately lead to the emergence of hegemony (Laclau, 1996). A discourse becomes hegemonic when it achieves to unify the social world around particular fixations of meaning, around the articulation of floating signifiers. Every hegemonic discourse is therefore political in the sense that it admits only one contingent fixation of meaning, excluding other possible meanings. This exclusion is what Laclau and Mouffe call ideology and what presents the critical edge of the *politics apparatus* in their theory of discourse.

Methodologies of analysing discourses with Laclau and Mouffe

34 In their writings Laclau and Mouffe have predominantly concentrated on specifying the epistemological framework within which a variety of methods can find application. This does not mean that Laclau and Mouffe's project as such is hostile to methodologisation (see Howarth, 2004) but adapting their concept for concrete analyses of data requires further specification of methods. The discourse analyst is therefore called on to be especially candid about the process of constructing a methodology, all the more so in view of the relative reticence on methodology that can be observed in many empirical studies which draw on Laclau and Mouffe. The transition from discourse theory to discourse analysis is achieved when the discourse analyst has adapted the discourse theoretical framework to the empirical phenomena in question. As Torfing (1999, p. 292) claims, this bricolage must be assembled in close concordance with the empirical data, otherwise it runs the danger of losing its analytical power.

35 It is in particular works by scholars from Germany which have recently sought to contribute towards a case-by-case development of methodology based on the thoughts of Laclau and Mouffe (see, for example, the edited collections Glasze and Mattissek, 2009; Nonhoff, 2007). This has led to a notable diversity of methodological approaches. Nonhoff's (2006) monograph on the project of a social market economy in Germany is one of the most detailed for a qualitative methodology. In it he aims to trace how the model of the social market economy became hegemonic in post-war Germany and garnered wide-spread support in a society which came to see it as a superior form of organisation of the economy. Nonhoff introduces the concept of hegemonic strategy as a hinge between discourse theory and empirical analysis. Hegemonic strategy is a means of arranging discursive elements with the help of stratagems. Nonhoff develops nine different stratagems which can establish

different relations between signifiers and thus weave together the discursive fabric. Using documents from the late 1940s and 1950s from economists, political parties or interest groups he shows how the lacking universal – Germany's economic prosperity – engendered a host of demands and analyses the type of relations established between these demands, the nodal point around which they were articulated and the lacking particulars to which they were a response. In so doing, Nonhoff is able to move beyond a mere content analysis and highlight the structural relationships between signifiers to explain the mechanisms of the emergence of hegemony.

36 Other studies home in on the identification of empty signifiers and the shifts and changes in meaning fixations over time (e.g. Bruell, 2007; Glasze, 2007a, 2007b; Mattissek, 2008; Schulz, 2007). Glasze, for example, investigates how Francophonia has historically been constituted through varying nodal points as a world-spanning region or geocultural space. Conjoining methods from lexicometry and narratology, he seeks to triangulate his analysis by exploiting the specificities of each method. Working with large digital text corpora that extend over several decades, he endorses a lexicometric approach, which analyses the relations between lexical elements in a quantitative fashion, for its aptitude to reflect the regularity of relations between signifiers and to chart the frequency and co-occurrence of signifiers from a diachronic perspective. Where lexicometric analysis falls short of analysing the exact qualities of relations between signifiers, Glasze supplements it with narrative analysis which embeds signifiers into the corresponding relations of difference or equivalence and is able to mark the emergence of antagonistic frontiers and dislocations.

37 A last field of inquiry, more microscopic in its endeavour, opens up around the processes of articulation and contestation of meaning in the formation of identities in everyday life. This focus emphasises that discursive fixations are always contingent and situated in specific contexts from which they draw their authority (Shapiro, 1992, p. 38). Studies attempt to 'locate and analyse the mechanisms by which meaning is produced, fixed, contested, and subverted' (Howarth, 2004, p. 341). Discourse analysis in this field makes use of reactive forms of data collection, such as interviews or participant observation, which are able to tease out the processes of negotiation in greater detail and afford a more comprehensive view on the context of identity formation than texts gleaned from documents (Hansen and Sørensen, 2004; Howarth, 2004). Linguistic expressions of discourse are usually combined with non-linguistic forms of data such as practices in order to get a fuller understanding of the mechanisms of discourse (Müller, 2009). Yet, while gaining purchase on the life worlds of subjects is critical, such an approach must resist the temptation of succumbing to mere hermeneutic interpretation and losing the wider structural anchors and relations between signifiers out of sight (Pouliot, 2007).

Thinking critical geopolitics through Laclau and Mouffe

38 From this brief outline there emerge three key features which make Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory highly germane to serve as a methodological basis for the conceptualisation and analysis of geopolitical discourses and identities. First, it conceives of *social practice as being a part of discourse* and

thus allows for the conceptualisation of identity as being both discursively inscribed, spoken and enacted. This transcends the discursive/extra-discursive divide that characterises much discourse scholarship. In so doing, it recognises that identities are not limited to the linguistic realm but cut across different systems of signification including social practices. This move also allows recognising that geopolitical identities do not emerge devoid of a context but are always situated productions. The articulation of geopolitical signifiers must be analysed as embedded in the particular institutional practices of micro settings, which may include foreign policy communities just as well as local border residents.

39 Second, with their systematic account of discourses, Laclau and Mouffe lay the ground for a perspective of discourse analysis which pays greater attention to *structural characteristics*. This form of analysis does not stop at interpreting discourses by summing up their content or offering critical commentary on them. Instead, it attempts to identify patterns and regularities in the construction and alteration of discourses. Such patterns have been identified in the conceptual vocabulary of Laclau and Mouffe, describing hegemony and antagonism, dislocation and filling, the logics of difference and equivalence, nodal points and moments, the split subject and identification. Applying such a framework to the analysis of empirical material points, discourse analysis beyond the traditional critical interpretation of texts and towards the theory-based identification of features structuring identities and their contestation.

40 Third and finally, the politics apparatus serves as a vehicle to tackle *ideologies as effects of discursive hegemony* and therefore provides a valuable tool for critical research that opposes the propagation of meaning hegemonies. If, with Laclau and Mouffe, geopolitics is about the construction of identity through the temporary fixation of meaning within geopolitical discourse, the task of critical geopolitics must be to analyse this identity as constituted within a naturalised discourse in which temporal closure has been achieved by hegemonic articulations. Critical geopolitics must look at how hegemonic articulations establish identity by excluding conflicting subject positions.

It is one of the tasks of hegemony analysis to examine why some signifiers come to represent the whole and why others do not. The analysis of hegemony cannot stop at the identification of a successful hegemony, but must also examine which alternatives have been excluded for the present hegemony to be possible (Thomassen, 2005, p. 295).

41 But a critical geopolitics inspired by Laclau and Mouffe must also create awareness as to the contingency of these hegemonic articulations and highlight the antagonisms which reflect this contingency and the ways in which floating signifiers become nodal points that structure discourses. In particular, critical geopolitics recognises the fundamentally open character of any identity, which may be concealed, however, through hegemonic discourses. In this sense, critical geopolitics does not *work* with discourse analysis as an instrument but it rather *is* discourse analysis.

Conclusion

42 Ó Tuathail (2002) demanded deeper theoretical engagement with discourse

analysis so as to move critical geopolitics beyond the stage of creative but ultimately analytically less rigorous and less systematic studies of discourse. By providing a systematisation of approaches to discourse analysis along the three core dimensions of context, analytic form and political stance, I hope to have prepared the ground for further engagement with and development of different forms of discourse analysis. More importantly perhaps, this paper is meant to encourage discussion and enhance methodological transparency in applying a concept which has proved highly attractive for critical scholarship but whose practical application to data has remained rather fuzzy. Clearly, in view of the multiplicity of understandings and methodologies, it is not sufficient for a transparent analysis in critical geopolitics to simply state that one is 'doing a discourse analysis'.

- 43 At the same time, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the analysis of discourse. Every discourse analytic methodology must be attuned to the different requirements and aims of the respective case study. Also, it always represents a trade-off between different ways of gaining analytic purchase and understanding social phenomena. The discourse theory by Laclau and Mouffe and the corresponding methodological thoughts developed in this paper are no exception. Being one of many possible approaches to discourse analysis, it does some things better than others. In particular, it is able to open an avenue for the inclusion of social practice in the proximate context of discourse analysis and offers the conceptual vocabulary for a systematic analysis of the regularities and structures of discourse.

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